

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

Traveling with Beau: My 34-day Trip to a Deeper Understanding of One Health

Author's Note: During an address on One Health at Tuskegee University in September 2012, I told the story of driving to Alaska with my dog, and being comforted by his companionship. "I probably drove 30% of the 10,000 miles with my hand on his soft and reassuring fur. No matter how much you love your wife, can you imagine holding her hand for 3,000 miles?" I asked the group.

My commitment to One Health stretched back a decade or more before Beau and I went to Alaska. However, my understanding was limited to the duo principals of comparative medicine and zoonotic diseases. During this trip, I discovered something else, a concept so fundamental to the human-animal bond that it changed my whole outlook on veterinary medicine.

Donald F. Smith

By Dr. Donald F. Smith
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On a quiet May night in May 2007, I lay in bed contemplating the turn in the road my life would soon be taking. I turned to Doris, "What would you think if Beau and I drive to Alaska and meet you there?"

"Sure, that sounds like a good idea," she replied and returned to her reading without further comment.

Two months earlier, we had made reservations to spend a week in Alaska's Denali National Park to celebrate the end of my administrative appointments at Cornell. After serving ten years as dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine, I was looking forward to a chance to decompress, and the mountains of central Alaska seemed like a good place.

I had been on a fast track of life and work since a child. Growing up on a small dairy farm in southern Ontario, I had sailed through high school with a good academic record and a surfeit of outside interests. Doris and I were married soon after veterinary college, and we moved to the United States where I entered a surgical residency at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1977, we relocated to upstate New York and started our family. Throwing myself into my academic career at Cornell, I climbed the administrative ladder, becoming professor of surgery and department chair a few months before my 37th birthday, then dean of Cornell's veterinary college ten years later.



*Beau cavorting by Lake Kluane in the Yukon after a stressful morning drive.
The Alaska Highway is in the background.
(Photo by the author)*

For years, I had been consumed with my work, usually thinking about some aspect of my surgical patients or research program, or contemplating some major administrative decision. Thankfully, we had some memorable family vacations as our children were growing up, but professional responsibilities were never far from the surface, and the accumulated mental congestion now clogged my brain.

Years earlier, a senior colleague had confided to me that he ended his deanship exhausted to the bone. I was also now experiencing a high level of mental and emotional fatigue, and I longed for a respite from it all. I also had to decide what to do now that my dean appointment was over. Was there life after deanship?

Beau was draped over our legs during our conversation. Hearing his name, he lifted his head and glanced up, then seeing there was neither food nor outdoor romp being offered, he quietly resumed his resting position. His 11-year-old frame was starting to show age, but apart from graying around the muzzle and eyes, and lacking the boundless energy that had characterized his youth, he was in remarkably good health.

Beau was the surviving member of our two sibling English Cocker Spaniels. In the summer of 2005, Belle developed a devastating metabolic disease common to Cockers, and \$4,000 and six weeks later, she succumbed to liver failure. We painfully adjusted to life with one dog.

I was familiar with one-on-one vacations, having followed my wife's admonition many years

earlier to spend quality time, separately, with each of our three children. I had been with Darryl to Montana's Glacier Park and the Grand Canyon, with Debra to Great Bend Park in Texas and a cheetah preserve in Namibia; and to San Francisco and a lacrosse excursion to the Mid-Atlantic States with Dennis. These experiences in surroundings that were new and different for each child made them feel uniquely special. More importantly, they facilitated unhurried conversations, and nurtured lifelong friendships. Maybe now would be my chance to have a somewhat parallel experience with Beau.

Doris was perhaps the only person who had confidence that I could make the 10,000-mile trip to Alaska (and back). A faculty colleague who had spent vacations hunting in the Dakotas cautioned me about the wildness of the Alaska highway, vividly sharing with me how his brother had got into a bar fight over the ownership of a leather jacket. "Be careful, Don," he cautioned, "that is wild country up there and there are some crazies."

Another faculty member whom I have known for decades turned to me after I had shared my plans with him and confidently informed me that I would get no farther than Chicago, before turning back. A Long Island veterinarian sarcastically spelled out each syllable of his ridicule, "DO YOU REAL-LY KNOW HOW FAR IT IS TO AL-AS-KA? And you plan to go there a-lone!"

Others were less pessimistic. One woman excitedly told me of her experience driving the route with her two cats as she moved from Alaska to Illinois a decade earlier. Another told me how he and his young family had fled the north after a two-year tour of duty in military service in the early seventies, traversing the frozen road in mid-February.

I had no interest in traveling from New York to Alaska as directly nor as quickly as possible. In fact, getting to Alaska was not my goal. Instead I yearned to get into the wilderness of my mind, using a transcontinental route as the vehicle by which that could be accomplished. My car would be my covered wagon, my dog my conversationalist, and the human and natural scenery my inspiration for reflection. As far as I was concerned, the longer and rougher the road, the better, as it would increase the likelihood of shaking loose the accumulated administrative flotsam from my mind and soul.

Another thought consumed me, one which had dogged me for years and that was the desire to return to the Arctic. Following my first year of veterinary studies, I had traveled to Eureka on Ellesmere Island – at the time, the second most northerly outpost in North America – where I had spent fourteen weeks with another student and ten permanent residents at a remote US-Canadian Joint Weather Station.

Spending the summer 700 miles from the North Pole had etched unforgettable memories. The perpetual 24-hour daylight enabled us to hike far out onto the tundra on weekends to see muskoxen, wolves, foxes, arctic hare, and even a polar bear.

As Robert Service penned in his famous Yukon gold rush poetry, the arctic grandeur tends to *hold you in its spell*. Once tasted, it calls you back. Though I often yearned to return to

Ellesmere Island, I also knew that that would probably never be possible considering the prohibitive cost associated with travel to remote Arctic regions. Perhaps this Yukon trip with Beau would provide a satisfying substitute.

Beau was an experienced traveler. A month in a vehicle, however, away from home, eating and sleeping in strange locations, might be a challenge for him. I also realized that traveling with him would constrain me like a single parent with a young child, unable to experience even the simple freedoms to which I was normally accustomed while traveling for business.

I resolved not to let my personal preferences have a negative impact on Beau. I would not eat in restaurants without him. Instead, we would picnic, eat in outdoor cafes, in hotel rooms and in the car if we had to. Locating pet-friendly lodging would be challenging, especially because we would not confine ourselves to a schedule. I decided we would camp sometimes or even sleep in our car if neither motel nor campsite was possible.



Map of Canada and the northern US, showing the route Beau and I traveled to Alaska. On the return trip, we traveled through Manitoba, making it the fifth Canadian province we traversed.

Because I wanted to experience small-town America, we would traverse the country on state and county roads, wending our way past the fields and villages that make up the America that lives and breathes, rather than the one that you fly indifferently over at 40,000 feet.

Traveling through Canada, especially the far north, would yield fewer road options. However, I was determined to avoid the Trans-Canada Highway and the Yellowhead Route, and instead drive over the grid-like provincial roads that crossed the Saskatchewan prairie. Once we reached Alberta and eastern British Columbia, we would, of course, travel the Alaska Highway.

I decided early on that I would travel incognito, not as a veterinarian. As much as I loved my

profession and delighted in seeing and learning from my veterinary colleagues, I needed to escape from those constraints. I needed to find my compass again.

We established other rules of engagement, pragmatic ones. We would stop at least every hour and we would never drive more than 40 miles without a break. We would remain true to our family tradition of walking each morning and evening. During our daytime stops, we would drift through parks, along village streets, across fields, along streams. We would meet people, dogs, statues and trees.

Though our son had a Jeep Wrangler that both Beau and I were fond of driving, I decided that a long trip of that sort would be too uncomfortable for both of us. Instead, we rented a Jeep Liberty, silver and low mileage. It was perfect.



*We reached Alaska on day 10.
(Photo by the author)*

We departed on Sunday morning, August 23, 2007. We would return 34 days later, having traveled 10,049 miles. Through eight states, five provinces and one territory. It was an epic journey, and it was probably another two years before I would start to understand what I really discovered on that trip about the meaning of One Health.

KEYWORDS:

One Health

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TOPIC:

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LEADING QUESTION:

Can you and your dog drive to Alaska?

META-SUMMARY:

The author describes his journey to Alaska with his dog.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.